Bus service between Agartala and Dhaka

548. SHRI B.J. PANDA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government propose to introduce bus service between Agartala and Dhaka;

(b) if so, the decision taken thereon; and

(c) by when the bus service is going to be introduced between the above two places?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI OMAR ABDULLAH): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. The Governments of India and Bangladesh have signed an Agreement and a Protocol to operate a passenger bus service between Agartala and Dhaka on July 10, 2001 in Dhaka.

(c) The bus service is likely to begin in the last week of August, 2001.

Indian fishermen in Pakistani jails

549. SHRI ABANI ROY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether a large number of Indian fishermen are languishing in jails of Pakistan;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether Government have taken any efforts to get them released;

(d) if so, the details thereof;

(e) whether Government have taken up the issue with the Head of Pakistan who paid visit to India recently; and

(f) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI OMAR ABDULLAH): (a) and (b) As per available information there are 196 Indian fishermen currently in Pakistani custody.

(c) and (d) As a result of Government's persistent efforts, Pakistan has agreed on 26.6.2001 to release 196 fishermen along with their 32 boats.

(e) and (f) Desirous of finding a permanent resolution of the problems of Indian and Pakistani fishermen, who from time to time are taken into custody, the Prime Minister on July 4 instructed that the Indian Coast Guard will not in future take Pakistani fishermen, who inadvertently transgress into our waters, in custody and that henceforth they will be turned back after due warning. During discussions in Agra on 15.7.2001, Prime Minister informed Pakistan President that this is the way out of the recurring problem which would go a long way in resolving this matter on a permanent basis.

Safeguarding India's interest in Afghanistan

550. DR. ALLADI. P. RAJKUMAR: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have made any arrangements through a third country to safeguard its interests to deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan; and

(b) if so, the details in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI OMAR ABDULLAH): (a) and (b) The situation and developments in Afghanistan impacts on India's national interests, including our security concerns. Government, therefore, closely monitors developments in Afghanistan and is in regular interaction with many members of international community on Afghanistan. As part of this process, India and Russia had decided to set up a joint Working Group on Afghanistan during the visit of His Excellency Mr. Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation to India on October 2-5, 2000. The first meeting of the group was held in New Delhi on November 20-21, 2000 and its second meeting was held in Moscow on June 25-26, 2001. Both sides have reviewed the situation prevailing in Afghanistan in all its dimensions and agreed to continue their cooperation at the bilateral level as well as multilaterally in this respect.

India and the United States discuss relating to the Taliban held areas in Afghanistan and on development in Afghanistan in appropriate bilateral forums, including the Indo-U.S. Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism. During the visit of Prime Minister to the United States in September, 2000, the two sides agreed to establish a framework of bilateral dialogue on issues of mutual concern relating to Afghanistan.